

A TRANSFER OF PROPERTY.

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CAINTED? Am I ac'aunted with 'er, Mr. Crosby? Ef ye c'u'd fin' a hoss or a cow as *was n't* ac'aunted with 'er! She 's the talkin'est woman in this hull State!"

"Indeed!" I said. I squared myself in the buggy, turning from contemplation of the brown acres trimmed with their endless little ruffles of green.

I had come from Philadelphia that morning, intrusted by the firm with a document

relative to the property of one Letitia Lunger, resident of Hampton, and wife of Cyrus Lunger, deceased. I knew by name alone the lady who held the title to the deed I carried in my vest. Hampton was a new experience to me. So, as well, was Jacob Slatter, who had approached me at the station with the offer of a "lift" in his rusty vehicle, for which favor he demanded compensation of a quarter, and, tacitly, such additional toll in matter of my personal history as he might be able to extract upon the road.



"HIS INDIGNATION WAXED UNDER MY APPROVAL."

Having put him in possession of a generous number of items regarding myself, I made excuses to my conscience for not refusing to accept the crumb or two that might fall to me concerning Mrs. Lunger. Moreover, there was yet a good mile to be covered before we reached our destination, and the gray was slow.

"Indeed!" I remarked again, but Mr. Slatter was in no need of encouragement. He jerked his slouch-hat over his eyes, and tickled the sumacs and switched them, as an index to his inner state. I was hardly prepared for that which was to follow; I am free to confess I was surprised. But if my chivalry—for which I claim nothing—was not strong enough to keep me from listening to matter so derogatory to one of the other sex, it must, at least, forbid me to become a party to its repetition.

Mr. Slatter was troubled with no compunctions.

"The talkin'est woman!" he would break

out, every now and again, as a sort of interjection. "The *talkin'est* woman! Ef ye c'u'd hear 'er, Mr. Crosby!"

"I shall, you know," I ventured once, but he waved me aside.

"Ef ye c'u'd hear 'er—r'arin' through the village, r'arin' up in meetin', r'arin' aroun' on'er farm! Talkin'? There's them she's talked out o' meetin', an' them she's talked out o' town. An' there's them she's talked into the burryin'-groun'—an' glad to git there at that!"

"I dare say," I responded sympathetically. "I dare say."

His indignation waxed under my approval.

"Done all 'er neighbors up," he continued, trailing a long leg out of the buggy, "cle' red 'em out! Furms with bes' prospects lyin' all aroun' 'er; think they're occipied? Think they c'u'd rent 'em, Mr. Crosby?"

"Done 'er pore man up; *he's* med 'way with! Managed to stan' it about two year! Goin' like a thrashin'-flapper—clapper, clapper, clap!"

"Trying," I said.

"Tryin'?" he ejaculated.

He screwed his lips together and started up the horse.

"I hope we 'll keep 'er with us. I hope 't 'll be a spell afore *she* gits there. I do, Mr. Crosby."

"Gets where?" I inquired.

"To the burryin'-groun'. An' I don't keef ef I hev my say. I hope 't 'll be a spell afore she gits roun' to *that*."

I expressed surprise.

"For the sake o' them that 's there, Mr. Crosby! For the sake o' them that 's tryin' to sleep! Ef so be they put *me* alongside 'er, I'd git up an' move my tombstun!"

He slashed the mare on both her flanks.

"Ef I owned 'er," he broke out again, "I'd mek 'er a queen."

"You 'd make her a queen?"

"Yaas, I'd mek 'er a queen. I'd give 'er one half the airth an' I'd tek the other."

We finished our ride in silence, for Mr. Slatter lapsed into eloquent gloom. He had had his say. The road forked, and we came upon a low white house. "There 's the place," he grunted, indicating with the whip. We ground the stepping-stone ominously.

"You are n't coming in, I suppose?" I inquired a trifle anxiously, alighting.

"Naaw," he returned, without looking at me; "I ain't."

I watched him wheel the buggy round with a sense of desertion.

"Be back for me in half an hour," I called.

He pulled his hat lower, and made a backward motion with his hand.

"Come out to the gate when she 's done with ye. I'll draw up down the road."

I found Mrs. Lunger a good-looking woman, with a gingham apron and a capable

eye. As I was able to gain opportunity and her indulgence, I made her acquainted with my errand, and turned over to her the deed to her late (and unfortunate) husband's estate. But it was not so much the volubility of her talking as the manner of it that overawed me.

"What man was that druv off?" she asked, as I sat with my papers spread upon my lap; and I knew by her eye that she knew exactly who it was, but was going to make me say it. I had to say it, too.

"Why, that was Mr. Slatter," I answered. "He 's waiting for me. He did n't come in because—" and here I paused idiotically, being unable even to invent a reason why Mr. Slatter did n't come in.

Mrs. Lunger helped me out; she brought her chair nearer mine, and settled her hands upon her knees.

"I'll tell ye why he did n't come in," she said. Then she waited.

"Why?" I was compelled to ask.

She smiled sarcastically.

"Because, Mr. Crosby, he knowed better."

"I dare say," I responded. I was

bound to make a fool of myself. But she waived it, and hitched the chair closer.

"Ef Jacob Slatter," she said impressively, "should walk his boots in here I'd give him the fire-shovel!"

I laughed perforce. "It 's well his boots are outside, then," I ventured, as a feeble joke. But I was unable to get on with her on any basis of comfortable pleasantries; she took me seriously.

"It 's well they air," she observed, "it 's well they air." She shook her head in mournful deprecation, and smoothed the gingham squares.

"I ain't speakin' in any onchristian sperrit, Mr. Crosby, or tellin' tales; I ain't callin' folks 'tater-bugs—'t ain't right: but



"JAKE SLATTER 'S THE MOST AGGRAVOKIN' MAN THIS SIDE THE AIRTH."

ef I do say as should n't, Jake Slatter's the most aggravokin' man this side the airth."

"Indeed!" I said. I looked meekly, tamely acquiescent. It had been her whole policy to make me commit myself. She caught my eye, and there she had me. I did n't get away within the half-hour, nor within the hour. I made an effort to rise once, if I remember, but she waved me back.

"Set down!" she said.

I learned a great deal about Mr. Slatter—more than, considering all that had passed between us, was comfortable for me to know. Indeed, I could almost have doubted that which I heard, had it not been that Mrs. Lunger appeared so well informed.

I was made to tremble, before I left, that fate had cast him across my pathway, to blush that I must ride back with him on the same wagon-seat. I found that there was hardly an obligation of man to man that he had not disregarded, only few of the commandments that he had left intact: that he did n't like the pastor, that he voted wrong at the election, that he would n't wipe his feet on the door-mat, had let the weeds grow in his garden, and had laid his wife in an early grave—in short, that I had been on the wrong side.

But whatever menace there might be to my soul in further intercourse with him, Mrs. Lunger had acquitted her conscience. I saw him in the high light of what he was.

She followed me out to the hallway.

"Lazy? Ye said lazy, Mr. Crosby?" (I had n't said lazy, though I claim nothing to my credit.) "Git him to p'int out his place on yer way to the caars.

"Mean? Ye said mean? Best look through yer pockets. What you ain't got Jake Slatter hez."

I glanced apprehensively along the drive; I was relieved to find Mr. Slatter far down the road.

"Waal?" he greeted me, as I climbed in beside him.

"Well?" I responded brusquely.

It was early summer when I first visited Hampton, and autumn when I went again. The firm had received a communication from Mr. Slatter. There were no particulars, except that he wished to see a legal adviser (myself the preference), and in due time I was delegated as before.

"Got my letter, did ye?" he inquired, after conversation had dwelt sufficiently on the merits of the colt he had driven down to meet me. "M-m! Thought as how ye done that little job las' spring for—"

"Mrs. Lunger?" I concluded amiably, willing to spare him. He nodded, and I felt that he was grateful. Then I added: "I remember. You thought if I could manage Mrs. Lunger you'd see what I could do for *you*?"

"Yaas," he assented; "guess that's the size of it. Thought"—adjusting a new yellow blanket more comfortably over our knees—"ye'd do better'n some feller that—"

"You were n't acquainted with? I see. Well," I agreed, "that's the right way to look at it. That's the way we get clients, you know."

The country lay before us in all the contagious indolence of October. There was an afternoon ahead to talk business; I did n't encourage him. We left the village, and he slowed the colt to a walk. The road was losing itself between the rows of sumacs, heavy now with their crimson fruit; through windows in the leafage I could, as before, catch glimpses of the fields. They were rich with harvest. The corn was standing in shocks, and the pumpkins lay in glowing heaps.

We wound round the brow of a little hill, and the cemetery came in sight. I smiled at the memory of a conversation it brought back to me.

"Speaking of Mrs. Lunger," I said to my companion, "I suppose you hear of her, or hear her, now and then?"

His glance rested on the white stones marking the, as yet, untroubled colony of the dead.

"Yaas," he responded, letting the lash of his whip trail along the hedge; "now 'n' then."

"How is she? Pretty well?"

"Fer's I ken ventur', purty waal."

"Talks as much as ever, does she?"

"I calc'late she does, Mr. Crosby; I calc'late she does. The fac' is—"

"You've been too busy to listen?" I smiled again at my moderate wit.

The day was sleepy, the sun warm. I was under the impression that the last time I came this way I had been amused. I felt an inclination, born of laziness, to get Mr. Slatter started again.

"She still runs the farm, I suppose," I prospected. He reached for a bit of sassafras, and placed it between his teeth.

"Naaw," he said, after an interval; "furm's to let—be'n some time back. Guess"—with a touch of incredulity—"ye ken't hev heard the news."

I looked expectant, and he chewed with evident relish.

"Moved!" he continued caustically. One could see he was warming to it. "Merried again!"

"No!" I sat up with genuine interest. "You don't mean to tell me! Mrs. Lunger? Married! *Who?*"

"Some cuss on the road up yonner!" He indicated with the whip-lash. "Show ye when we sight 'is place. Long-legged, wuthless, balkin', contrarious critter—las' man ye 'd pick out, o' course."

"Well," I ejaculated, "I 'll be—" I refrained from saying what I would be. It was hard to find just the word. One needs an assortment in Hampton. "So there was a second man willing to take such a—responsibility? With all due respect to Mrs. Lunger—"

Mr. Slatter regarded me with a glimmer, and jerked the hat over his eyes.

"Ye think ye c'u'd tell where to put 'im? Ye 'd say the fools *wa'n't* all dead?"

I was forced to confess that the thought had occurred to me.

"There's them in the village," he admitted, "as is sayin' the same."

I had n't a doubt. The village would hardly neglect such a morsel.

"But how did it come about?" I said, laughing. "Old flame of hers—this gentleman? Was in love with her, eh?"

"Naaw," he asserted; "not as I know on. Calc'late *not*."

"After *him*, then, was she? In love with *him*?"

He gave himself a shift in the wagon, and the coltan unmerited cut.

"'N love with 'im, wuz she? Loved 'im like pizen, so I hear tell."

"Then why did they marry?" I asked. I own I was puzzled. "What made them do it? I don't understand."

"What made 'em do it? Lord knows! Ask *me*? Why, did ye say, Mr. Crosby? 'Cause folks 'd 'a' sooner bet on the sky cavin' in."

"But will they keep it up? *Can* they? How do they act?" I continued. "What do the neighbors expect?"

"Expeck?" he retorted. "*Expeck?* There's where ye air, Mr. Crosby. That 's what 's onsettlin' the village. That 's jes the ornery part. Her with 'er talkin', an' him with 'is balkin'; think ye c'u'd see a clear case? Livin' as chipper there, ackin' as pesky! Coo'in' like turkle-doves, nosin' like pet lambs, 'cause not a soul but expecked 't 'u'd be cats an' dogs! Cussedness—that 's why they done it! Pure, sheer cussedness!"

We emerged from the sumacs, and I saw before us, at the end of the bit of farmland, the house he had pointed out to me on my previous visit as his. The button-ball, as I remembered, shaded the dooryard, and the odor of late-blooming flowers strayed out through the pickets. But I laid my hand on his arm as I recognized the figure in the apron who leaned on the gate.

"Why? What?" I stammered; but Mr. Slatter forestalled me.

"Yaas," he said defiantly, from under the hat, "that 's Mrs. Lunger—her as wuz. She wants ye to mek over that there deed to *me*."

